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ABSTRACT

An efficient way to help students achieve academically is to maximize the consistent attendance of permanent teachers in the classroom. Students nationwide are spending increased amounts of time with instructors other than their permanent teachers. A large contributor to the problem of teacher absenteeism is mandatory leave for professional development training programs. To combat teacher absenteeism caused by burnout, stress, or abuse of available teacher leave, districts have implemented an incentive program instead of a use them or lose them policy. Student achievement, to a large degree, depends on continuity of instruction. Research shows that interruption of instruction negatively affects academic achievement. Students often experience lack of instructional continuity due to exposure to untrained substitutes who often do not have regular teaching certificates and are not qualified to be in the classroom. School districts must provide effective, comprehensive training for substitute teachers that addresses professional behavior, classroom management, legal and first aid issues, teaching and instructional strategies, fill-in activities, and substitute resource kits. Such training benefits students more than anyone else. Trained substitutes will most likely do a better job of maintaining instructional continuity, which is essential to student achievement. (Contains 17 references.) (SM)

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Student Achievement – Improving Our Focus

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Student Achievement – Improving Our Focus
By Amber Hawkins

The desire for every student to achieve greatness and be "children of promise", as Gen. Colon Powell stated (NSBA, 2000), is and should be the primary focus for all educators. All students have the right to receive a good education in this country. However, the way in which school board members and district administrators set about to improve students' level of achievement is, perhaps, not always beneficial to students. One of the clearest answer lies not in the enforcing of professional development classes for discovering new teaching styles, but in maximizing the consistent attendance of the permanent teacher in the classroom.

Students across the nation are spending an increased amount of time with instructors other than their permanent teacher. There are many contributors to the rising rates of teacher absenteeism; however, it seems that a large contributor to teacher absenteeism is the mandatory leave for professional development training programs (Griswold & Hughes, 1997). In fact, 77% of teachers are reported to attend professional development classes sponsored by their school system (Matthews, 2000). Along with the evident problem of having permanent teachers out of the classroom, the training received may not always be useful to the teachers. Teachers in Grosse Pointe Michigan, say that "the training sessions consist of vague or irrelevant speeches by college professors or book authors who have never taught a class of squirming 13-year-olds" (Mathews, 2000). George D. Bond, a math teacher at Woodbridge High School in Prince William County states that "some inservice programs are good, but most are not good. We seem

to be getting things that are desired by the administrative staff, but not always what the students need" (Mathews, 2000). Not only is teacher absenteeism being increased by professional development programs, but absence among teachers is also on the rise due to the stress associated with "burn-out", especially in urban districts (Pitkoff, 1993).

Most school districts are experiencing teacher absenteeism rates of 8-10% (Warren, 1988, Staffing Industry, 1999). The financial burden of such a high rate of non-attendance is incredibly heavy; school districts have to pay both the permanent teacher for his/her absence, as well as a replacement - or substitute - teacher. Annually, the national average of the combination of these two factors, according James Lewis, Jr., equals approximately two billion per year (1981).

Research has shown that to combat teacher absenteeism caused by burn-out, stress, or the abuse of available teacher leave, districts that have implemented an incentive program instead of a "use them or lose them policy", have lower teacher absenteeism rates. Susan Peterson relates a report done by Freeman and Grant in which a district increased staff attendance by 16 percent and saved $165,000 by the use of incentives. Such incentives could include recognition through meritorious attendance plaques and certificates (1991), monetary pay out at the end of the school year for not taking any sick leave (Kology, 1998), or the buyback of unused sick leave (Norton, 1998). If school districts provide days off and do not provide an alternative incentive for attendance, they are ultimately reinforcing absenteeism. Further, it is vital for principals to have an open door policy that lets teachers report grievances and talk about the issues they are facing in the classroom that may be contributing to their feelings of stress and "burn-out". According to

Blaine Sorenson, Substitute Trainer for the Substitute Teaching Institute at Utah State University, and previous principal, "programs that recognize teachers is an effective way to encourage teacher attendance and dedication; districts need to foster an atmosphere that does not reward nor provide incentives for teacher absenteeism." Providing alternative pay incentives for attendance and creating methods of recognition for teachers will markedly increase teacher attendance; thus, school districts will save money, and students will ultimately benefit from more consistency in the instruction they receive.

Student achievement, to a large degree, depends on the continuity of instruction. The above statistic regarding teacher absenteeism adds up to one full year of every student's K-12 education being taught by a substitute teacher (Smith, 1998). And in highly impacted schools, at-risk students are spending closer to 13.5% of the school year with a substitute teacher (Adams, 1999), which amounts to almost two years of their K-12 education. This interruption of a student's instruction has been shown to negatively affect student achievement. In a research study on teacher absenteeism, it was reported that "where students were poorest and failing the most, their teachers were absent the most. The percentage of students reading below grade level was the greatest predictor of school employee absenteeism . . . (Pitkoff, 1993). Thus, it should not be surprising that another research study on the correlation between student achievement and teacher attendance found that "students with teachers who had fewer absences were found to have had significantly larger improvements in grade equivalency" (Woods, 1997).

Perhaps the presence of a teacher other than the permanent teacher would be less regarded as an intrusion if that substitute teacher held a regular teaching certificate and was well-qualified to be in the classroom. Unfortunately, such a substitute is a rare commodity in this time of economic boom and teacher shortage. Districts are recognizing this shortage and are, in turn, lowering their requirements for substitute teachers in hopes of increase their substitute teacher pool. Some school districts are so desperate from this substitute shortage they hire individuals with nothing more than a high school diploma (Bayles, 1999). The end result of this practice is that schools have an unqualified "warm body" in front of a classroom of students who are sometimes barely younger than the substitute teacher. Such a person rarely exhibits professional dress, language, or attitude. They rarely teach or properly follow the lesson plans of the permanent teacher (if any are given). Substitute teachers often pop in a video or let the class have a study period, which could turn disastrous, due to the high probability that these substitutes have no training in classroom management. In a recent survey conducted by the Substitute Teaching Institute at Utah State University, it was found that 64.8% of school districts do not require substitute teachers to attend an orientation or skills training session and 91.8% of school districts provide no ongoing training for current substitute teachers. Thus, while the permanent teachers are away, their students are often experiencing a lack of instructional continuity due to exposure to untrained substitute teachers.

The blame for this lack of continuity of instruction and classroom misbehavior is often unnecessarily placed on substitute teachers. But with so little training, school districts do not

have the right to ask for anything more superior; the saying "you reap what you sow" truly applies here. Therefore, it is vital for school districts to provide an effective, comprehensive training program for its substitute teachers. According to Max Longhurst, Education Specialist for the STI/USU, the following five items must be included to have an effective training program (2000):

1. Being prepared and professional
2. Classroom management
3. Legal and first aid issues
4. Teaching and instructional strategies
5. The use of fill-in activities
6. Creating of a SubPack or resource kit

Students will ultimately respect an instructor more if his/her demeanor signifies professionalism. Perhaps it is considered common sense that any instructor would dress, act, and behave in a professional manner; but, since volumes of horror stories, regarding lack of professionalism in substitute teachers, would denote otherwise, is vital for substitute teachers to be trained on being prepared and professional.

Classroom management is possibly the most important aspect to include in a training program. To be able to manage a classroom filled with students with whom the substitute teacher has never been in contact is absolutely vital. If a substitute teacher is well-trained in the area of being able to manage a class effectively, the rate of substitute retention will certainly increase.

Geoffrey G. Smith, Executive Director for the STI/USU, further concurs that substitute teachers can be successfully trained in skills that will effectively manage 94% of all classroom misbehaviors. Training in classroom management can directly affect the retention rate of substitute teachers. It has been found that the number one reason substitute teachers leave the profession is due to their lack of classroom management skills.

Substitute teachers are often held at the same legal liability as are permanent teachers. This requires information and instruction on the legalities that permanent teachers have been taught and are expected to follow.

It is vital for substitute teachers need to have knowledge about effective teaching methods to ensure that actual teaching is occurring in the classroom when the permanent teacher is absent. Due to the lack of an education degree, substitute teachers need, at least, to learn an overview of the teaching methods discussed in universities or higher education institutions.

Finally, lesson plans left by the teacher need to be followed by the substitute teacher; however, oftentimes, these lesson plans run short of the time allocated for a class. If substitute teachers have no training in establishing back up lessons or activities, students will seize upon this as an opportunity to disrupt the classroom and cause havoc. Therefore, substitute teachers need to have ideas for fill-in activities along with a resource kit to help them be prepared for extra class time or other unexpected situations.

Training has been shown to increase the number of applicants (Arko, 1998, University of Dayton News) and increases the rate of retention. If substitutes are trained to be prepared and

professional, given instruction on classroom management, and instructional strategies, they are more likely to have a rewarding experience in the classroom.

Apart from the meeting the expectations of the substitutes themselves, training benefits the students the most. If administrators view student achievement as the most important aspect of education, school districts should implement incentives to reinforce teacher attendance which, in turn, will increase student achievement; this alone will reduce much of the dire need for substitute teachers. And even if the permanent teacher is absent, students will not experience a wasted day because their substitute teacher has been trained on the knowledge, resources, and abilities s/he needs to be successful at such a difficult job. Substitute teachers who are trained will most likely do a better job of maintaining instructional continuity, which is essential to student achievement. Even if students continue to spend one to two years with a substitute teacher, those years will not be filled with instructional waste because their substitute teachers are well-trained.

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